

EUGENICS AS A MORAL IDEAL

The Beginning of a Progressive Reform

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THE subject of eugenics divides naturally into two great branches, which may be called the negative and the positive. *Negative eugenics* aims at checking the deterioration of the human stock owing to the rapid proliferation of what may be called *human weeds* under the conditions created by cultivation: it is imperative to cope with this growing evil, and easy to see that, unless something is done to stop them, the weeds will impose intolerable burdens upon the more valuable flowers of humanity, and will crowd them out. The admonition to cultivate our garden includes, therefore, the duty of weeding it.

It is also fairly easy to see what sort of thing must be done. For the weeds of civilization are largely *consequences* of civilization. Under other social conditions they would not flourish and could not exist. Natural selection would speedily eliminate them. All that a society desirous of rational action has therefore to do is to refrain from cuddling and cultivating them, to withdraw the protection extended to them by social institutions, or better still, so to improve on nature's crude and cruel methods as to eliminate them painlessly, rapidly, and effectively. Of such improved methods many are known, and others can be devised. Negative eugenics therefore, though an urgent need, is practicable, and probably the most important social aim philanthropy can set itself.

But negative eugenics is not enough. It is powerless to *improve* the human race and to lift human life to a higher level. It can only arrest deterioration. If we want improvement, progress, the creation of superior types of humanity, the realization of

ideals, we must look to *positive eugenics*, which sets itself to inquire by what means the human race may be rendered intrinsically better, higher, stronger, healthier, more capable, so that human life may become happier and more worth living.

Now this is a very much bigger and harder job. The more one goes into the ways and means of it, the more difficult it looks. Still, it is not a task to despair of. It is not impossible. Something very like what is needed has been done once, and can presumably be done again. For the present human race has evolved, from something we all think lower and inferior, by the efforts of creatures much less potent, intelligent, and well equipped than ourselves. Under providence no doubt; but is it not very near blasphemy to assume that the creative *nisus* was exhausted in evolving us, and cannot be trusted to sustain further efforts if we will make them? Is it not unspeakably base and craven for us to content ourselves with remaining the poor creatures we are, when we might become something greater and better? For us to despair of carrying on the evolution of man would be to confess ourselves traitors to the cause of progress and *essentially inferior* to our ape-like ancestors who aspired to better things *and attained them!* As, moreover, only the most besotted optimist would contend that at present man is perfect and needs no improvement, it is clear that he *ought* to be improved. He ought to be improved in a great variety of respects and in all possible ways. And it is a great shame that we have done so little to explore the possibilities. Herein lies the essential and enduring justification for positive eugenics.

THE DECAY OF OUR IDEALS

Now if the function of positive eugenics be such as I have indicated, it clearly constitutes a moral ideal at least as good and legitimate as any other. For it is fit to stimulate our moral energies and to evoke moral enthusiasm. Moreover, it may very well fill the gap in our social structure left by older ideals which have faded or become defunct under the conditions of modern life. It is almost a *secret de polichinelle* that modern life stands in great need of new and effective ideals, and that morals are in desperate need of reinforcement, precisely and particularly in the quarters with which positive eugenics would most directly be concerned. I mean, of course, the social relations of the sexes and the arrangements for the propagation, preservation, and education of the human kind. These have always constituted one of the major problems of human society, and to whatever ideals, motives, and sanctions any society has appealed, no arrangement has ever been quite effective and satisfactory in practice. Now it is no exaggeration to say that over large areas of the civilized world sexual morality has broken down, not merely in practice—which would be nothing new—but even more palpably in theory, and that the great institution which has hitherto assured the continuance of the race, the family, is everywhere showing ominous symptoms of collapse. It is high time, therefore, that we discovered or devised some further moralizing influence.

It is evident, moreover, that the moral agencies on which we have hitherto relied to curb individual licence and self-assertion are progressively losing their grip on the moral situation. For a variety of reasons, including the unwisdom and unprogressiveness of their attitude towards the problems of modern life, the religions all seem to be waning, and though their moral value is not perhaps in all cases beyond cavil, there is nothing to take their place.

Certainly ethics cannot hope to do so. Theoretic ethics is a broken reed. No intelligent man can live long in any academic atmosphere without becoming aware that

academic ethics has no positive moral value. Indeed, on the whole its value is strongly negative. It is often positively demoralising. The academic disputes as to how (if at all) the Good is to be defined, and how it is related to pleasure, may conceivably be a good mental gymnastic, though even this may be doubted. But it is an old story, as old as Socrates and the beginnings of ethical reflection, that, as his critics complained, ethical reflection is very upsetting to moral beliefs. 'Know thyself' does not mean 'Respect thyself,' and does not tend to translate itself into 'Improve thyself.' So the intellectual analysis of instinctive and ingrained emotions and convictions is apt to be merely disintegrating.

The professors of morals usually try to counter this criticism by contending that moral theory cannot be *expected* to have any beneficial effect upon moral practice. Morals, they say, merely provide the material for ethical theories to contemplate and speculate about, and it is vulgar and Philistine to look for any more intimate and vital relation between theory and practice. Substantially the same answer is given to a second objection that ethics, as it is taught in universities, diverts our natural moral energy into unprofitable channels, and fritters it away in the futile discussion of artificial and antiquated subtleties which never mattered much and have long ceased to have any practical meaning, while it leaves aside, untouched and unmentioned, the real pressing problems of moral life.

This second charge leads on to a third, the most damaging of all. Moral philosophy is practically useless, not merely because it has adopted a false theory of the relation of theory to practice. Its professors have intentionally, of malice prepense and in their own selfish interests, made it useless and meaningless, in order to shirk a theoretic problem which they could not solve and dared not touch, lest it should get them personally into trouble. This problem concerned the application of moral principles to concrete cases. After the Catholic moralists in the seventeenth century had come to grief and fallen into ill repute by

evolving a very scientific but very demoralizing system of Casuistry (upon mistaken lines) in their vain endeavours to solve this problem, the Protestant moralists, who were really involved in *the same* difficulty, thought it safest to steer clear of the subject of application, to cases, to fact, to life, altogether. So, in order that the purity of moral principles might run no risks of contamination from contact with the sordid facts of life, they proceeded to make them *inapplicable* in principle.

The culmination of this sort of trickery—for it is nothing more—is to be found in the Categorical Imperative of Kant, which ostensibly proclaims the sacrosanctity of Duty with tedious reiteration, while actually forbidding us to ask it what, in fact, our duties are. It is still esteemed in academic circles as the supreme effort and example of a pure morality, and largely accounts for their emptiness. Its academic admirers have overlooked the damning fact that it is only 'safe' because it is utterly meaningless. For a principle that cannot be applied to concrete cases at all, or (what comes to the same thing) can be made to answer them in any way any one pleases, is as meaningless and worthless in theory as it is in practice.

EUGENICAL ETHICS IN PRACTICE

Eugenical ethics clearly will not fall into this trap. It will not refuse to be 'practical.' It will not refuse to consider application to cases. It will avoid the dilemma of Casuistry by pointing out, with Aristotle, that moral rules are never absolute, nor meant to be taken in abstraction from cases. Hence they are never in themselves decisive. They are meant for the guidance of moral agents with whom the decision must remain. But these must learn to apply them with an intelligent appreciation of the circumstances of each case. And the better they understand the circumstances under which they are called upon to act, the better is their judgment likely to be.

Hence the enormous enlightenment, which we owe to modern biology, as to the laws which determine our physical and mental

inheritance, can, and should, affect our actions, and modify them for the better. For example, the man who knows that there is heritable weakness, defect, disease, or insanity lurking in the stock from which he springs should conscientiously consider the probable effects of his defect, not only on himself, but also on his offspring. If he finds himself compelled to regard himself as hopelessly tainted, he should abstain from parenthood. If he is not so bad as that, he should at least make sure that he does not marry into another tainted stock, and should scrupulously avoid defects identical with those of which he knows himself to be the hereditary victim. If he is drawn towards a woman afflicted with a similar taint in her blood, say insanity, he should vividly realize the likelihood that some or all of his children will go mad, even if their parents themselves escape the doom they transmit. Already eugenical moral judgments of this sort are far from rare, though they will have to attain a much greater diffusion and intensity before they can do much to rid human stocks of dangerous 'recessives,' or even create a social sentiment strong enough to support strong measures against those who will not or cannot see their duties in this eugenical light. For it is one of the most distressing features of the situation that such considerations will *not* occur to those who need them most. The feeble-minded, for example, just because they are such, are very unlikely to perceive their duty to posterity. Being incapable of exercising self-control, they will have to be controlled by other means.

But this social control of those who cannot control themselves clearly belongs rather to the problems of negative eugenics. There is no doubt that heritable but preventable defects contribute a large percentage to the flood of human misery and that their inheritance can and should be stopped. But I have only alluded to the social failure involved in the existence of vast numbers of blighted lives brought into the world to suffer needlessly and uselessly, to illustrate the hideous and repulsive immorality of our present social order and of the systems of

ethics and moral philosophy that do not hesitate to approve of its atrocities, or at best say nothing about them.

REVIVAL OF THE CLAN

But my aim now is to consider what suggestions *positive* eugenics can make to improve the social order and the human race. I should advocate for this purpose, in the first place, a resuscitation of an ancient institution which has played an enormous and, on the whole, a beneficial part in history, but has in recent times lost greatly in repute and in many countries fallen into disuse. I mean the larger family, clan, or *gens*. It is not too much to say that originally the *gens* was the backbone of the early civilizations. It was nearly everywhere the social unit interposed between the individual and the tribe, city, or state, and far more potent than the latter in controlling and training the former. The most cursory reader of Roman history can hardly fail to apprehend that it is very largely the history of the great Roman families, their ambitions, rivalries, and policies, and owes its distinctive features to their continuity and tenacity of purpose. Similarly, the Roman character, in virtue of which, more than of anything else, Rome conquered the world, was formed by the stern discipline of the *patria potestas*. Our histories do not perhaps make it equally plain that the early history of the Greek cities was almost equally dominated by the great families, and that so long as these endured aristocracy was the natural form of government in Greece as in Rome. Similarly, it is obvious that the history of the mediæval Italian city-states is essentially family-history, and the superb palaces which adorn them are intelligible only as the abodes of noble clans of whom a surprising number have survived to our days. The stable civilizations of the East, again, the Chinese and Japanese, owe their survival primarily to the family-system which endured through all the vicissitudes of wars and dynasties.

It seems clear then that the *gens* as a form of social organization is highly con-

ducive to the preservation of a biological stock, and so of any valuable qualities of which it may be the vehicle. The *gens* is not, however, by itself or merely, a biological stock; it is at most one half of such a stock, and as inbreeding is impossible or dangerous, an association of *gentes* into a congenital aristocracy is requisite to conserve the qualities of a superior stock. It follows that the conception of the *gens* must be reformed in the light of modern science; it must embrace the *cognati* as well as the *agnati*, it must no longer be conceived as patrilinear or matrilinear, but as *both*. Our noble families should realize that they must trace their descent through *both* their parents, and that biologically the mother is just as important as the father, and that the captivation of a callow boy by a flighty ballet-girl may mean the ruin of a noble stock. This realization is likely to be a powerful check on the *mésalliances* which are a blot on so many pedigrees. In future King Cophetua will not marry his beggar maid so lightheartedly at sight.

DEMOCRATIZING AN ARISTOCRACY

Another reform to introduce into the old clan-system would be a more democratic organization. There does not seem to be any good biological or social reason why the position of head of the clan should descend by primogeniture or seniority without regard to merit and ability. It should be made elective, after the fashion I have sketched in the paper on *Eugenical Reform of the House of Lords*,* and it is conceivable that with a small number of electors with a strong *esprit de corps* and an intimate knowledge of all the circumstances, all keenly alive to the welfare and greatness of their family and anxious both on public and private grounds to pick the best man, better elections might as a rule be made than with the vast hordes of ignorant and careless voters to whom we now entrust our political destinies.

Of course, it would be necessary to endow the clan with a legal status and certain

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sorts and degrees of authority over its members. In particular there would devolve upon it the duty of controlling the matrimonial vagaries of its members. Rules, of a eugenical character and intent, would have to be laid down as to the conditions under which the clan's assent to a matrimonial alliance would be granted or withheld. These rules would evidently be more effective and easier to enforce than ordinary legislation to prohibit socially undesirable marriages, and would more narrowly restrict the right of a member of a noble class to follow his whims than that of ordinary citizens. Rightly; for the principle of *noblesse oblige* would clearly apply.

But in itself there would be nothing new about the principle of family control of matrimonial affairs. It is already and everywhere a very real influence, and in many societies, past and present, left the individual, especially the woman, very little choice. Too often it took the form of forcing women to make 'good matches,' *i.e.* to marry rich or powerful old men, whom they detested. Perhaps under eugenical tuition they may detest them less in future, because they will have more admiration for the qualities of which wealth and power are commonly the consequences. It may be hoped, however, that in the eugenical society of the future family pressure on the individual will tend to be exercised in a more rational and salutary way, and will interfere with the individual's liberty of choice only in cases where there is genuine ground for objection and he might well pray to be saved from his own desires. Hitherto, the strongest argument for the love-match has been, not the insight and wisdom of the parties to them, but the shallowness and unwisdom of the principles on which the *mariage de convenance* has usually been arranged. In future we may hope that eugenical qualities and records will enter more and more into the preparations for the great adventure of mating, and will exercise such a fascination over the young that they will find it easy to fall in love with their possessors. It is not probable indeed, for several reasons, that marriage will speedily cease

to be a lottery, but it need not be so *appallingly risky* a lottery as it is now rendered by the prevailing ignorance of both parties as to their own and each other's defects. And in course of time it ought to become a lottery in which every one worth marrying should have a good chance of drawing a prize, in the shape of a eugenically sound and commendable mate.

The institution of the improved clan-system I have outlined would not detract from the influence of the narrower family upon the individual, but would reinforce and reinvigorate it. It might indeed be contended that it would suffice to rely on the family spirit alone, without the clan, to control the individual, simply by cultivating social approbation and recognition of eugenically superior families and thus fostering family pride. Now history shows that family pride is a potent passion, and one to which men are capable of sacrificing themselves and everything else. It would therefore be a master stroke to enlist it as an ally of the eugenical conscience. But there can be no harm in further reinforcing and regulating it by setting it in the wider context of the clan. We can hardly err by imposing too many structural restraints on the licence of the amorphous hordes that throng our modern cities.

SELECTION OF SUPERIORITY

Of course, I am aware that these proposals mean a revival of aristocracy. But I would raise the question whether a true aristocracy is not worth achieving. If we emancipate ourselves from catchwords, democracy is a means not an end, defensible only as conducive to a better life than was possible under a reign of privileged classes whose superiority was merely imaginary. The real argument for political equality is not that men are born equal, but that they are born so *unequal* in so many ways and that society requires such a variety of services that the only practicable form of political organization is to ignore their inequalities and to give votes to all, and then to trust to the intelligent few to manipulate or

cajole the many into abstaining from fatal follies. Now this is not a very strong argument, though it may have been stronger than any that could be urged for any of the old alternatives to democracy. But a eugenical aristocracy would be a novelty in the political world, and would really *be* superior. Moreover, if we aim at better things, we must follow nature's method. Whatever else natural selection means, it means that some are to be preferred to others, and we too must select if we aspire to better types of man.

But what *are* the better types of man we should aspire to? The critics of eugenics often assume that it must be possible to state them with their specifications all complete, before it is possible or worth while to make the least eugenical effort. But this is a complete delusion. It is not the way we ever learn. We learn by trial and error. We do not know what the good, or rather the better, is, any more than we know what the true, or rather the truer, is, in advance of experience. Until we have experimented and learnt wisdom from the outcome of our experiments, we can only state in general terms that it would be good to achieve something better than the existing average of man, a creature stronger, healthier, wiser, more intelligent, trustworthy, and moral, and less ephemeral. Nor need we hesitate to add, 'more beautiful,' though from the strictly biological point of view beauty is perhaps the hardest of all the coveted qualities to account for rationally.

There is, however, one piece of advice which may safely be given to any society that attempts to remould itself nearer to the heart's desire by eugenical expedients. This is that all attempts to reach an ideal must start from the actual. It is no use to postulate to begin with a human nature that does not exist. The mentality invoked and the motives appealed to must be such as are familiar to human psychology; the institutions presupposed must be those operative in our actual world. Neglect of this proviso was the fatal mistake which Plato made in his *Republic*, and which condemned all his

ideals to sterility and futility. Plato postulated a philosopher-king with absolute power and perfect wisdom who was to institute the ideal state by an instantaneous *coup d'état*. But his first measure was to be grotesquely impossible. All above the age of ten were to be driven out of the city, and the philosopher-king was to rule and educate the remainder. Evidently Plato did not realize that he could not have taken care even of a single baby.

PRIZES FOR DESERVING BABIES

Any practicable, and therefore serious, proposal for eugenical reform must eschew such follies. It must not presuppose a revolution but must begin to be operative here and now, and operate more potently as more resources are placed at the service of the eugenical idea. I will conclude my remarks by sketching one such institution which could be started by private enterprise with quite a moderate outlay, and ask whether it would not have an effect of the sort desired. I would call it the Eugenical Baby Show, and proceed as follows:

First, let a representative committee be found of doctors, educators, scientists, artists, practical philosophers, and other persons in whom the public would have confidence. Next let them collect funds and organize their Baby Show (or perhaps merely a Eugenical Section in a Vulgar Baby Show, which would serve as a control experiment), offering as many and as substantial prizes as their funds permitted. The parents of the babies entered for these prizes would, of course, have to state their pedigree and allow their statements about the history of the family to be verified. Then the babies would be themselves examined and the awards made after due consideration both of themselves and of their ancestry. Finally, and as a matter of course, their pictures would be published, like those of our successful athletes and other notorieties. For evidently, to be the first eugenical prize-winner of the year would be a high social distinction, and a prelude and stimulus to further honours. In subsequent years there would be periodical revisions and

renewals of the awards, and further publicity about the doings and development of the prize-winners, who would no doubt be aided by eugenical scholarships, with more pictures. They would thus remain in the public eye, and much would be expected of them—more, and more important things than are now expected of a prince, duke, athlete, or film star, the attractions of whom they would in a manner combine. They would lead a strenuous life and one highly competitive, but glorious, and would from time to time be re-examined and re-appraised, in order that the committee of eugenical judges might estimate how far they had judged aright, and whether the prize-men were availing themselves of their opportunities. When their education was completed, they would go out into the world as distinguished men ready made, with a national reputation, greater and better deserved, because more in accordance with their intrinsic merits, than those of the characters with which I have compared them. Every profession would be open to them, and their success would be practically

assured. They would be flooded with lucrative and honourable offers of employment, and no right-minded girl would dream of refusing their offers. A eugenical first prize would soon be recognised as the greatest prize to be won in the lottery of life.

And what about the lower prizes and the honourable mentions? They too would be well worth winning, and would stimulate many ambitions, including that of reversing the original verdict and surpassing the original victors. Thus, insensibly but constantly and inevitably, the thoughts of all would be turned in the direction of eugenical excellence, and gradually but surely, their thoughts would influence and improve their acts. It is safe to predict that sooner or later an enlightened public opinion thus converted to eugenics would compel every State to take over the private enterprise of improving the race, and to extend and enforce it by legal sanctions. And then biological evolution might get under way again, and man might grow into a being as far superior to his present type as he now is to the gorilla and the chimpanzee.

